

Washington, D.C. – Today on Capitol Hill, the Agriculture Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, of which Congressman Sanford Bishop (D-Albany) is a member, heard testimony from representatives of the telecommunications industry, the federal government, and rural interest groups, including Marty McClendon, Chairman of the Flint River Soil and Water Conservation District from Leary, Georgia, on the lack of broadband access in rural America. The panelists testified on current impediments to expansion, such as market conditions and infrastructure requirements, as well as the effects of limited broadband access on our national security, education, health care, and the economy.

“In the 21st century, lack of broadband access impacts the health, safety, welfare, and economic viability of our rural communities,” said Bishop. “Broadband is a basic service these days and we have an obligation to ensure its availability for everyone.”

During his testimony, McClendon said, “Telecommunications technologies have advanced today to a level that allows rural communities for the first time to realize a true equal connection and competitiveness with the country’s urban economy. This has been demonstrated as more and more baby boomers return to rural communities, but they want their broadband so they can keep working. So the remaining barrier seems to be the infrastructure and cost of implementing a wide area broadband network.”

The hearing also focused attention on RUS, or Rural Development Utilities Programs, which have been funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) since the 1920s to bring modern utilities to rural America. Today, these programs include funding public-private partnerships to increase broadband access in rural America. However, public-private partnerships to extend broadband to rural areas still leave many communities underserved, particularly in Southwest Georgia.

“USDA can and needs to do more, and I believe that sentiment was communicated today,” said Bishop. “Today’s hearing shed some light on the remaining difficulties affecting access and I am hopeful that Congress, along with USDA and the telecommunications industry, will continue to work together to bring affordable broadband access to every corner of our nation.”